

# The Effectiveness of Communication Skills Counselling in Improving the Quality of Marital Relationship of Couples

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## Abstract

The focus of this paper is to determine the effectiveness of communication skills counselling in improving quality of marital relationship of couples. The population of the study consists of Diploma II student of 2009/2010 academic session, Institute of Education in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, totalling about 275 subjects, each comprising of male and female married couples who were randomly selected and assigned to experimental and control groups. An experimental design of post-test only control groups was administered to generate data from the subjects of the study in the two groups for seven (7) weeks. An instrument titled "Couples Communication Skills Questionnaire section on Improving Communication" was administered to both experimental and control groups for data collection. A t-test technique was used to analyze the data. The result showed a statistical significant difference between mean scores of participants in the study. Based on this finding, recommendations were made on how to experience quality marital relationship in communication of couples.

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## INTRODUCTION

In marriage relationship, intimacy increases as partners let down their defenses, learn to relax in each other's company and find that they can expect reciprocal support during good and bad times (Jossenlson, 1992). Being able to express thoughts and feelings, and to listen, are important components of all close relationship (Benokraitis, 2008). This type of relationship enables partners to experience intimacy when they share a mutual emotional interest in each other, hopes and dreams for a common future together. In this type of commitment many positive aspects such as respect, affection, harmony, companionship and trust are experienced. Each partner is available to the other not just during times of stress but day in and day out (Waters and Crowell, 1994).

Communicating effectively in any relationship, especially that of marriage, establishes strong and intimate bond where spouses respond to each other's needs, help each other, spend time together and feel emotionally close (Cutrona, 1996; Myers and Booth, 1999). When a spouse is sensitive to a partners need, the relationship will become more intimate, flourish, and boost each other's self-esteem and offer encouragement and support when there are problems. Thus, marriage is a life time commitment that requires communication by

partners to sustain it. This act will develop into mutual friendship of knowing the heart of one another and sharing one's heart with a partner who is trusted (Dagari and Adamu, 2013). Commitment in a marriage relationship is a behaviour that demonstrates repeatedly and in a variety of situation that partners will persevere together during tough and difficult times.

In a healthy marriage relationship, spouses feel comfortable in venting their frustration because their partners are considered trust worthy, respectful and are best friends or confidants. Pelts (2002) concurred to this by reporting that talking to each other is a pleasant way to pass time, get to know each other, unburdens one's heart and deepen intimacy between partners. However, as individuals, we are often driven by a need to please everyone and be accepted by them, in the process, problems are encountered which when not properly handled can cause serious strained or demoralized individuals in the marriage relationship. These problems or challenges on marriage relationships are indicators of areas that require both partners to pay genuine attention. They are outlined as follows:

1. **Not Listening:** Both partners may be so intent on making their point that they are simply waiting for their turn to speak rather than listening to the other spouse.

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2. **Not responding to the issue at hand:** if partners are not listening to each other, they will not be able to address a problem. For example, in cross complaining, partners present their own complains without addressing the other person's point. In counter proposal, a spouse inquires a partner's suggestion and presents his/her own idea. In stone walling, which is much more common among men than women, one of the partners may respond "Hmmm" or "Uh-huh" but he/she neither hears nor responds; it is as though the partner has turned into a stone wall (Krokoff, 1987; Gottman, 1994).
3. **Blaming, Criticizing and Nagging:** instead of being listened to and understood, partners may feel neglected or unappreciated. They feel that their spouse magnifies their faults, belittles them, accuses them unjustly and makes them feel worthless and stupid (Gordon, 1993; Burleson and Denton, 1997).
4. **Scape-goating:** is a way of avoiding honest communication about a problem. In its place, partners blame others for their own problem which is debilitating and counterproductive (Noller, 1984).
5. **The silent treatment:** Not talking to your partner however, builds up feelings of anger and hostility (Rosenberg, 1993).
6. **Coercion or contempt:** Partners may be punitive and force their point of view on others. Contempt involves insult, name-calling, sarcasm, hostile, mockery, and body language such as rolling your eyes, sneering and curling up your lip (Gottman, 1994). These and many problems of communication cause ineffective interaction or unpleasant expression of feelings, thoughts and behaviors that result to poor quality relationship in marriage.

The focus of this paper therefore is to find out the effectiveness of communication skills counseling in improving the quality of marital relationship of couples. It is also hoped that couples would learn to see challenges or problems in marriage relationships as opportunity to acquire some new ways of enhancing and working together for the success of their relationship rather than being confronting, defensive or negative to pull or destroy it. The research study is also to help or enable couples acquire and practice new ways of communicating better with each other in order to experience quality relationship in marriage. The research objective for this study is to determine the

effectiveness of communication skills counseling in improving quality of marital relationship of married couples exposed to experimental treatment and those not. The research null hypothesis states that; there is no significant difference between the effectiveness of communication skills counselling in improving quality of marital relationship of couples exposed to experimental treatment and those not.

#### IMPORTANCE OF GROUND RULES FOR FAIR FIGHTING IN THE MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP

Often times, some spouses yell, displace rage, use unbridled attacks and physical aggression on their partners with whom they have established long lasting relationship. These every day pattern-of exchange of couples talking is not good communication but destruction of the relationships. Couples can increase positive communication and decrease destructive interaction patterns using Ground Rules for Fair Fighting to improve the quality of marital relationship:

1. Do not attack your partner: When you attack your partner during interaction, he/she will only become defensive and will be too busy preparing a good rebuttal and not hear what you have to say.
2. Avoid ultimatums: When talking to your partner, do not give ultimatum. No one likes to be backed into a corner.
3. Say what you really mean and do not apologize for it. Avoid lies, they are harmful and people rarely believe liars.
4. Avoid accusations and attack, do not belittle or threaten a partner.
5. Start with your own feelings, that is, use i-message instead of you-message express how you are feeling, for example, "I feel" is better than "you said" and focus on the problem, not on the other person
6. State your wishes, request clearly and directly, do not be manipulative, defensive or sexually seductive.
7. Limit what you say to the present. Avoid long listing of complains from the past.
8. Refuse to fight using dirty words such as criticizing; being sarcastic; nagging, no silent treatment and no name-calling. Keep the communication line open.
9. Use positive humour and comic for relief such as laugh at yourself and the situation but not at your partner. Learning to take ourselves less

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seriously and to recognize our flaws without becoming so self-critical that we wallow in shame or self-pity, can shorten fights.

10. Strive to be close to each other as soon as possible after a misunderstanding or disagreement by resolving the issue and keep talking. This prevents dirty fighting and it holds partners to their commitment to negotiate until the issue has been resolved or defused (Crosby, 1991; Rosenzweig, 1992).

### METHODOLOGY

The design of this study is a post-test control group only. This design involves random assignment of subjects into groups. There were two groups: the experimental group was counseled on communication skills and the control group was not counseled. The target population for the study was all Diploma II students of 2009/2010 academic session, Institute of Education, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, totaling about 275. The group members were men and women who are married and living together as husband and wife (subsistence marriage). They are literate and understand English language.

For the purpose of this study, a random sampling method was used to assigned subjects into groups. A sample of 30 subjects each, consisting of male and female married couples who were students, were selected and assigned into two groups of experimental and control so as to participate in the study.

The instrument for the study is titled "Couples Communication Skills Questionnaire"

section on Improving Communication (CCSQ) was developed by the researcher. It consist of two sections: the first section is on bio-data while the second section is on "Improving communication" with nine items to measure the quality of marital relationship in communication. A four point scale of rating responses was selected for the study as follows: Strongly Agreed 4; Agreed 3; Disagreed 2; Strongly Disagreed 1.

A content validity of the instrument was conducted through pilot testing. The pilot test data was analyzed and yielded a cronbach's alpha level of 0.882 for content reliability coefficient and internal consistency of the instrument. The data collection procedure was conducted in two phases. The first phase was the experimental session conducted on communication skills counseling for two hours each week and lasted for six weeks. The subjects were treated on the following with the researcher making clarification and explanation on the area of difficulty: concept of communication and types; definition of listening and the types; speaking rules and method; use of I-messages to report feelings; Ground Rules for fair fighting and the last week was for revision.

The second phase of the experimental study was the administration of the instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was administered to both the experimental and control groups and the data was coded for analysis. The data obtained was subjected to a t-test analysis. The scores of subjects in both experimental and control groups, were compared and the result is presented as follows:

**Table. 1:** t-test of experimental and control groups on communication skills improvement of spouses.

Status	No.	Mean	score	Study derivative	t	df	p.
Experiment	30	1.8556		.25960	3.44	58	.001
Control	30	2.1889		.46242			

Critical value of t at 58 degree of freedom = 2.00

From the table above, the mean scores and standard deviation for experiment group is (1.8556) and (.25960), while that of control group is (2.1889) and (.46242). The mean score of experiment group is (1.8556) which is lower than that of control group that is (2.1889). The observe t-value of 3.44 is higher than critical- t value of 2.00 at 58 degree of freedom. The observed level of significance is .001 which is

lower than 0.05 ( $P < 0.05$ ). Therefore, the hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference between effectiveness of communication skills counseling in improvement of quality of marital relationship of couples exposed to experimental treatment and these in control groups is rejected. Therefore, the null hypothesis is not accepted.

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## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The result of the tested hypothesis indicated a statistical significant difference in the level of communication skills improvement in quality of marital relationship of the experimental group and those in control group. This finding implies that participants in treatment group learned and acquired new ways of communicating with their partners that help to improve the quality of their marriage relationships. A possible explanation could be attributed to the treatment programme package which might have enable participants learned how to communicate and process their feelings or thoughts properly to their partners. Pelt (2005) reports that becoming more aware of the pattern of expressing feelings that can help avoid pitfalls that traps and also improve chances of learning to express feelings at new and deeper levels thereby understand each other better. Similarly, Pierce (1994) opines that couples often try to escape from the throne of negative emotions and want to regain the initial good feelings that they had about their relationship and their partners by learning ways that aid communication. Branon (2008) also asserts that often times, the desire to feel true love where a husband or wife unashamedly cherish the other by enjoying those tender moments when he/she can also find ways to add fun to their relationship, is always strong among couples.

This means that communication skills of married couples could be improved through training. They could now use the new skills acquired from the study to make their marriage come alive by quality communication where mutual self disclosed, understanding, and trust, being specifically polite and respectful to each other. Couples could also use fair fighting skills to manage or deal with anger, negative humour, suspend value judgment and consider individual strength when communicating with each other in order to improve the quality of their marital relationship (Dagari and Adamu, 2013).

Hence, counseling offers couples the opportunity to learn ways of resolving difficulties or problems that cause ineffective communication and how to enhance the quality of their marriage relationship. It does offer couples the awareness and need to be more committed to and consciously change their perception of issues so as to engage each other in effective communication that enhances quality relationships in marriage. Frank (1991) also reports that the experience of emotional

arousal, the consequence of expression, form an important curative factor.

## CONCLUSION

The paper discussed the effectiveness of communication skills counseling in improving quality of marital relationship of couples. Couples communication skills training package on how to improve the quality of marital relationship could be useful in that a multiplier effect through communication of couples can be felt in the manner they relate with spouses and others. The finding of the study revealed that communication skills counseling was effective in improving quality of marital relationships of couples. Therefore, counselors could use counseling on communication skills to improve quality relationship of couples. This is necessary because when couples learn how to cope with disagreement and make choice of respecting and trusting each other during communication, they would experience quality relationships as they interact together.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations by Knapp and Hall 1992; Gottman and Declaire, 2001 are suggested to enhance the quality of marital relationship through effective communication:

1. Couples should create time to talk together regularly. If your partner has a complained, address the issue by asking for information. Do not be defensive, find out why your partner is upset. This would keep you close up and create intimacy with each other, thereby make your bond stronger, provide the needed support and strength to face the daily challenges of life.
2. Do not generalize when talking or complaining over a problem with your partner. Stay focus on the issue that has created the challenge. Accusations only increase anger and tension.
3. Couples should be specific when reporting an unsatisfactory behaviour or unmet needs. A specific complain is easier to handle than general criticism.
4. Couples should be honest to each other in their daily interaction with one another. Honesty does not only mean not lying, it means also not manipulating others. Do not engage in bullying, outwitting, blaming, dominating or controlling. Do not allow yourself become a long-suffering martyr or door-mat. Truthfulness and sincerity reinforce mutual trust and respect, which are





key factors for experiencing quality communication in marital relationship.

5. Couples should regularly use positive words of appreciation on each partner. This will enhance both the discussion and relationship. The use of non-verbal acts such as hugging, smiling, and holding of hands can sometimes, be more supportive than anything you might say.
6. Above all, just listening to your partner talk sharpen your emotional communication skills by being really interested in what is said rather than, always focusing on yourself and what to say in response.
7. Couples should seek for counseling in order to learn how to see problems in marriage as opportunities to learn something new that can increase its quality. That is, there is need for conscious effort by both partners to work together for the success of their relationship by being effective communicators.

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